

## Associate Parliamentary Group on Women, Peace and Security (UNSCR 1325)

Iraq Meeting  
House of Lords  
February 19th

On Tuesday, February 19th at the House of Lords, more than 40 people, including members of House of Lords and House of Commons, civil servants and civil society, attended the annual plenary of the APG 1325 on Iraq.

Lord Judd chaired the session and welcomed various experts on the situation of women in Iraq among the participants and introduced the speakers, Ms Janet Benshoof and Fawzija Ali.

Janet Benshoof - human rights lawyer and Founder and President of the Global Justice Centre, US. Ms Benshoof is an experienced trainer for civil society in gender issues. Ms Benshoof made the following points in her presentation:

- Women have have been blackmailed, forgotten and used as a geo-political football in Iraq.
- In 2004, she was involved in the training of War Crimes Tribunal judges in Iraq.
- Aug 2004 - she met with Tribunal judges who said they needed to apply 1325 as binding law. This was the first time these judges had received training on gender crime, rape, honour killings.
- SRC 1325 provides the court with the legal entitlement to rule over mass violations and honour killings as war crimes. SCR 1325 ensures that women are not simply seen as victims but as actors with agency.
- Women from ethnic minorities, e.g. Kurdish, often experience a double discrimination "for their sex and their ethnic background."
- The United Kingdom (FCO) was the only country willing to offer funding for the training (\$70,000).
- Judges (including one woman) were very receptive to the training on issues such as how to treat victims of gender based crimes etc.
- During the last 18 months the Global Justice Centre was able to train more judges.
- Iraq is a particularly politicised state, but even in transitional states the justice system needs to implement 1325.
- The aim of Iraqi women is to change the domestic penal code along the progressive lines adopted by the War Crimes Tribunal.
- The Iraqi Tribunal is now the only court in the Middle East that currently recognizes and applies international law.

Fawzia AlWadji - Iraqi citizen living in the UK gave an insight to the discriminatory situation during both dictatorship and the current war.

- Since the British-American invasion, most of the civilian victims were women.
- Women are targets of terrorist groups either determined by their ethnic minority or their sex.
- The new but regressive constitution contains a paragraph that allows men to insult and harm women. This reflects and leads to a culture of violence, not only in families but also a society as a whole, where 56 % are women.
- More than 8 million of women are under the age of 40, ¼ in these women are young widows, doomed to be expelled from social life.
- Only 15 % of Iraqi women have had access to some sort of education mostly not beyond basic literacy. Ms Ali called on the British public to support Iraqi women in their struggles.

The presentations were followed by Q&A session.

Some key themes that emerged from the session included:

- Women from religious minorities such as Christians are threatened and attacked; there have been reports of forced conversion to Islam.
- The current constitution of post-Saddam Iraq derives from ancient Sharia law and is the most backward legal framework in the world. Thus women's rights are even less respected than during the Saddam era.
- The origin of Iraq's discrimination against women lies in a variety of religious and traditional customs. It is not to Islam as such only. The discrimination against minorities for instance is one of the relicts of the tribal history.
- Putting 1325 in place: Representation of women in public services and jurisdiction is very poor.
- In the Iraqi parliament, women are decently represented. But they tend not to use their legislative powers in favor of women or for structural change. Instead, they voted for the adoption of the constitution based on Sharia law.
- Reforms under 1325 have to aim at improving the current deteriorating situation of women's rights in Iraq.
- Lessons learnt from the implementation in other countries like South Africa and Rwanda need to be implemented.